

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA (UCA)

A Conversational Resource for Associated Schools and the Wider Uniting Church



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Introduction

This resource is in a process of continuous development by members of the National Consultative Committee on School Liaison (and is for adaptation for local contexts). The committee is a national gathering of staff from each Synod involved in conversations and negotiations with schools (of many different types and relationships to the wider UCA).

It is designed to name some reasonably well known characteristics of the Uniting Church which are also often evident in associated schools and hence create a basis for conversations amongst schools and the wider Church about their Uniting Church-related history and identity.

The UCA and its connection to independent schools and residential colleges¹

Alongside its advocacy for more holistic outcomes in all educational settings, the Uniting Church in Australia participates in numerous different ways in the life of independent schools and residential colleges across Australia to:

- ▶ foster the creation of safe environments where children and young people can explore and discover their God-given dignity and progress their individual potential.
- ▶ Support the growth and development of children and young people who are discerning the meaning, identity, belonging and purpose of their lives such that they can participate in a just society and lead creative and compassionate lives.
- ▶ Contribute to excellent outcomes for students by encouraging or supporting schools to augment effective teaching and learning with appropriate mentoring and coaching.
- ▶ Encourage leadership by students, staff and governing bodies that is engaged, developed, valued and demonstrated with humility and integrity.
- ▶ Allow exploration of faith in respectful and engaging ways and assist the development of children and young people in the light of the Christian story guided by the Uniting Church in Australia Basis of Union.



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Characteristics of the UCA for Conversations With, Within and Amongst Associated Schools

The uniqueness of the UCA is contained, in part, in the collective demonstration of the following characteristics.²

Each characteristics statement below includes:

- 1)** a description of how this identity is lived out within the wider Church (it is not expected a school will mimic all, or in some cases any of the activities noted in this description - As a school it will have its own unique way of contributing to the particular characteristic) and....
- 2)** a set of questions (which can be further developed and added to over time) which invite a school to consider how this characteristic is relevant to its context and where its strengths and development opportunities exist in each area.

The questions are not a compliance checklist. They invite a conversation about relevance, strengths and development opportunities.

1. Actively engaging with First Peoples.³

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

A very important dimension to being the Church in this country is that we are a Church in Covenant with the First Peoples of Australia. From its earliest years, the Uniting Church has been involved in actions which express our solidarity with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Older members will recall events at Noonkanbah Station in the Kimberley in 1980, when Uniting Church members stood in solidarity with the traditional owners, the Yungngora people, against the mining of their land.

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) was established in 1985, and a Covenant between the UAICC and the UCA was implemented in 1994. This Covenant recognises that working for reconciliation amongst people is central to the Gospel.

In 2009 the Church revised the preamble to its Constitution to acknowledge its commitment to just, inclusive and equal relationships that recognise the place of First Peoples in Australia.

² Based on 'The DNA of the UCA – Exploring the key characteristics of the Uniting Church in Australia' – A resource prepared for the 40th anniversary of the UCA by Rev Dr John Squires.

³ Reflective of the Basis of Union (1992) paragraph 2, the Covenant with the UAICC (1995) and Preamble to the UCA Constitution.



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How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- Has the school undertaken work to understand the Aboriginal history of the land which it occupies and to build relationships with the descendants of the original custodians?
- Does the school have an enrolment policy for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students?
- Does the school have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander scholarship policy or program?
- How has the school given due consideration to First Peoples' connection to country in the development of such a policy or program?
- What support is provided to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders to flourish?
- Does the school have an employment policy for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employees?
- How does the school celebrate Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture and understanding amongst its students?
- Does the school meaningfully acknowledge and involve Aboriginal elders and people at school events?

2. Enabling faith development and individual wellbeing within the UCA heritage of worship, witness and service. ⁴

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

The UCA strives to 'walk its talk' in living out its values and faith within the community and giving its members the opportunity to develop their faith to participate in the life and work of the UCA and also to serve the wider community. It demonstrates this:

- Through the life of UCA congregations - communities in which people seek to follow Jesus, learn about God, worship, share their faith, care for each other, serve the local community and seek to live faithfully and with real joy.
- Through ongoing educational opportunities within each Synod and Presbytery providing courses on such topics as pastoral care, living out the UCA values and faith, ethical ministry, safe church and theological studies.
- Through community service agencies operated by the UCA in areas as diverse as aged care, mental health and children's services which assist marginalised and vulnerable individuals and families.
- Through local parish missions which live out the faith of the UCA by supporting those in need within the community.
- Through the formation of ordained ministers and lay people to work in diverse ministries within the church such as congregational ministry, chaplaincy in schools, hospitals, prisons and the armed forces.



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How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- How does the school's religious education curriculum reflect the values of the UCA and encourage an understanding of the life and witness of Jesus Christ alongside an awareness of the stories and meaning of other faiths?
- Are worship services conducted within the school creative, engaging and contextually appropriate and do they encourage cross-generational participation of the students, staff and other members of the school community?
- Are the wellbeing programs within schools robust and tailored to the needs of each developmental stage and how do the wellbeing programs and spiritual life of the school complement each other?
- Do the school's social justice programs and sustainability activities encourage active "hands-on" participation of each student?

3. Celebrating the equality and value of all people.⁵

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

The Uniting Church in Australia's Basis of Union affirms that every member of the church is involved in the corporate practice of the faith and that every person is gifted by the Spirit to engage in ministry in their own particular way. We are a church that values the ministry of each and every person, demonstrating the diversity of differences that make up the human family.

How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- How does the Board culture demonstrate the equality and value of all people?
- How does our enrolment policy affirm the value of each child?
- What systems are in place to affirm and value all children?
- How do recruitment and human resource policies and procedures affirm the value of each person?
- How do we recognise, encourage and grow the gifts of all of our staff and students?



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4. Intentionally listening to all voices which then directs collaborative decision-making.⁶

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

The Uniting Church has been a leading organisation in developing meeting practices that assist people to seek the spirit and to discern the will of God. In practice, this has led the Church to a process of consensus decision making. This does not just mean that the Church avoids a simple “majority rule” type of decision. There is a manual for meetings which outlines a detailed process for discernment and decision making. The manual attempts to ensure that before decisions are made there is ample community building amongst the decision-making body and that there is ample time for information receipt and deliberation. The focus is on listening to the Spirit before people speak, and striving to find a way forward that most, if not all, people can see as the will of God for the Church. This process also attempts to ensure that there is joint action across all levels and places in the Church to implement decisions.

How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- What protocols and processes aim to ensure that the Board and senior leadership groups develop and maintain a strong sense of connection, understanding and community amongst themselves?
- Which methods have been adopted to ensure that executive and board decision-making includes insights from diverse aspects of the school community and wider stakeholders?
- How are Board and senior leadership meeting practises designed to ensure that concerns, questions and dissent are deeply heard, tested and responded to?
- What processes specifically test the degree of dominance of particular voices on any decision-making body within the school?



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5. Rejoicing in the diversity of life-giving faiths, cultures and languages.⁷

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

Since 1985 the Uniting Church has deliberately named itself a multicultural Church and continues to grow in its understanding of that name. This means that the Church rejoices in the diversity of cultures and languages which are found across Australia. The Basis of Union recognises that we share much, as Australians, with people of Asia and the Pacific, and the Church has maintained strong relationships with churches from these regions, as well as forging new links with churches in Africa and the Middle East.

The Statement to the Nation, issued in 1977, acknowledged that the Uniting Church seeks a unity that transcends cultural, economic and racial distinctions. There are people from 193 language groups who belong to the Uniting Church and Sunday worship is celebrated in 26 non-indigenous languages and many indigenous languages across the country each week.

The Church, institutionally and locally, takes an active role in the promotion and conduct of interfaith dialogue, affirming that such dialogue is key to creating and sustaining a culture of peace and harmony.

How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- How does the school act to understand and celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity in its school catchment area and encourage representation of this diversity in the whole school community?
- Beyond mandated practices (such as curriculum requirements and anti-discrimination legislation) how does the school actively increase cultural sensitivity and competence amongst its whole community?
- Reflecting again on the previous question, how does the school improve understanding of the perspectives and practices of different faiths?



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6. Entering into justice for all peoples and the environment.⁸

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

The Uniting Church inherited from its predecessor Churches a strong commitment to advocating for justice for all. Many Uniting Church congregations and members are actively committed to serving those people who find themselves on the margins of society. This commitment was clearly articulated in the 1977 Statement to the Nation and it has been evident in many actions undertaken by Uniting Church members over the decades.

The Uniting Church has joined in common causes with other groups and organisations in society, in advocating for a welcoming attitude towards refugees; in lobbying for a fair and just system of caring for people who are experiencing poverty and homelessness; in seeking equity for workers in their workplace; and in many other issues.

In like manner, the Uniting Church has always been a Church which honours the environment and supports a sustainable lifestyle.

Although such matters are firmly on the radar of the public now, they have long been integral to the DNA of the UCA. Once again, the 1977 Statement to the Nation flagged such commitment. A series of subsequent documents attest to the ongoing determination of the Church to live responsibly, in such a way that we minimise the damage we cause to the environment in which we live and ultimately live in a regenerative harmony with the wider environment.

How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- How are issues of justice reflected in the lived experience of students at the school?
- How are issues of justice reflected in the curriculum?
- How does the school board develop decision making frameworks so that its decisions reflect the Church's commitment to justice and the environment?
- How are environmental concerns reflected in the building programs of the school?
- How does the school determine whether the parent and broader communities see the school as having a commitment to justice and the environment?



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7. Courageously elevating difficult subjects and evolving responses.⁹

How does the wider UCA live out this principle?

The Uniting Church in Australia Basis of Union commits us to learn from the insights of contemporary scientific and historical studies and affirms that we remain open to correction by God in the way we order our life together.

An example of an area of enduring controversy engaged within the UCA has been that of human sexuality. There is a wide diversity of opinion within both society and the Church, and lively debates regarding human sexuality have taken place in the various councils of the Church. In dealing with such issues, we have learned how to debate with respect and integrity with ongoing conversations looking to employ a “Space for Grace” process to encourage respectful, empowering, and inclusive decision-making.

How does our school or college reflect this? For example:

- How do the practices of the school encourage the raising of controversial topics in the appropriate forum and help to demonstrate that the topic has been appropriately considered (including the involvement of those directly affected by the issue)?
- Does the school or college have a process for developing ethics statements or other ways of exploring potentially complex “future developments” amongst the whole community (as an example only, Artificial Intelligence and robotics)?
- How does the school keep connected to and seek to engage with the controversial topics currently being considered by the Church?
- How are students encouraged to explore and engage with difficult subjects affecting their community and lead inter-generational conversations regarding those subjects?

**UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA,
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